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## THE MESSENGER IN GREEK TRAGEDY

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One of the peculiarities of Greek tragedy, a peculiarity not universal but so widespread as to be fairly typical, is the presentation of scenes, and those, too, crucial scenes, not to the eye on the stage, but to the ear by the report of a messenger. Thus, to suggest one or two of the more famous examples, the scene at the climax of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus puts out his eyes, is reported by a messenger. A messenger tells Medea of the effect of her gifts, the poisoned robe and crown, on Jason's bride, the little Creusa. The sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis and her escape with Orestes from the Taurians come to us by word of mouth from an eye-witness, the messenger.

My own interest in this so-called convention, as not merely a fact but one with some meaning, dates, as much interest in the drama is likely to date, from experience in staging a Greek play. Four years ago we were preparing to present at Smith College the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and found ourselves struggling at rehearsal to bring out of the quiet girl, cast for the messenger's part, fervor and vitality enough to carry the scene of Iphigenia's sacrifice, not only across the footlights, but through the barrier of an alien tongue to the audience beyond. One day she wailed out: "I never would have taken this part if I had known what it was! I knew I couldn't act an important part, but I thought I ought to be willing to help in something small. I supposed it would be like a Shakespeare messenger. Now the whole play rests on me, and if I fail, the whole thing is a failure!" That she did not fail I saw clearly from the faces of the audience as I sat in Agamemnon's hut to prompt. But I acquired the conviction sharply that the messenger is not a supernumerary but a star, and needs more attention than he usually gets in a study of Greek drama.

In several recent and standard works on Attic tragedy I find a paragraph or so alluding to the messenger in a somewhat apologetic fashion as a survival of epic tradition, an element still undramatic. For that theory, of course, it would be well to find this epic survival particularly prominent in Aeschylus forming an inchoate blend of epic and lyric not yet fully fused, or again in Euripides, whose grip on dramatic construction is sometimes weak. But the Aeschylean messenger reports are either so brief as to be almost negligible or, after the fashion of the song of Deborah, lyric rather than epic, and Euripides simply uses with varying success a device which is fully developed by Sophocles—a past master of dramatic construction and art. The *Philoctetes* alone has no messenger. In all the other extant Sophoclean dramas there is at least one typical messenger scene. To determine whether this is in its essence dramatic involves going back at least to Aristotle and defining terms, which is work entirely too fundamental for the purpose of the present paper. Mimetic these scenes are certainly not. Yet dramatic they may possibly be. But the messenger is, in the main, judged or misjudged on the basis of a formula far more current—one of those elusive sayings on which everyone seems to be brought up. When I ask any of my friends, people who are not specialists but who know something of Greek, something of the drama, "What is your idea of the function of the messenger?" I get an answer so nearly identical that I could almost get it recited in concert. "The Greek love of beauty," say they, "the Greek love of beauty and moderation could not tolerate scenes of violence and slaughter. Hence it was customary to have these scenes take place off the stage and be reported by a messenger."

Now the Greek sensitiveness to violence and slaughter must have been located in the optic rather than in the auditory nerve. For, certainly, neither in the messenger's speech nor elsewhere are we spared details of horror. To avoid horror it would seem simpler not to use the myths of Oedipus, Philoctetes, or the Bacchae, for example. But this theory is perhaps one of the unconscious survivals of that Greek world in which we all used to believe—a world of pure white marble with a touch of gold and not a jarring note of crude color. But whether he is regarded as an exponent of this

popular formula or more scientifically as a crude survival of the epic, an evidence of undeveloped art, I should like to speak a word in behalf of the messenger—to indicate some of his advantages as a dramatic device.

I have taught grammar long enough to know the difference between purpose and result. No one ever supposed Sophocles to have said, "My audience are Greeks. They do not love slaughter. I will introduce a messenger in order to avoid it." Neither do I suppose him to have aimed consciously to produce the results which I shall call to your attention. But a device, however foreign to us, by which the great dramatists, at the summit of emotion and interest, preserved in their own day the integrity of their own conceptions from inadequate presentation or misrepresentation, selected with the unerring instinct of the artist just the accessories necessary to illuminate rather than becloud a scene, avoided the pitfalls wherein the sublime comes down to the ridiculous and left in imperishable form to us what otherwise had been ephemeral—for this device it is perhaps well to be grateful, if only as for the primitive tool whereby a workman turns out a handmade rather than machine-made product. And then there is always the chance that, being consummate artists, the great dramatists knew what they were about.

Let me illustrate briefly a few of these points. The drama, as an art, is a mixed one. Part of it is created by the author, part by the actor. What the author contributes may survive. How evanescent is the actor's art every generation knows when it faces a new generation. We can hand down Shakespeare's Hamlet to our children—but not Booth's! The actor, also, not only in the rendering of his lines, but in his stage business, may reinforce the author's conception or he may nullify it. It is small wonder that many modern dramatists, jealously wishing to conserve the integrity of the children of their brain, introduce stage directions so full, so written, that they constitute a literary part of the play. In portions of Mr. Barrie's *Rosalind*, for example, his heroine's speeches—and speeches are all we expect the playwright to contribute to the text—fill a very small portion of the

page. Perhaps, therefore, when Maude Adams is dead some other actress may present the part with all the pretty by-play Mr. Barrie had in mind.

It is small wonder that in the scenes which are the crisis of his work the dramatist should put out his hand for some means whereby he, and not the actor, should "create the part." Curiously enough, too, "scenes of violence and slaughter" may especially demand heroic measures. For scenes of violence and slaughter are largely inarticulate. They are all emotion and action, in which words find small place. What could a doll-baby like the little Creusa, Jason's bride, say when the golden circlet and the robe, Medea's gifts, began to burn her pretty, curly head and fair flesh! She could only run up and down and scream, and because Euripides sent a swift messenger to voice her inarticulate anguish, we see her still running up and down screaming amid her screaming women,

Shaking her head this way and that,  
To cast from her the crown; but firmly fixed  
The gold held fast its clasp; the fire whene'er  
She shook her locks, with doubled fury blazed.

Medea can speak for herself. She has a cause and she can plead it. But from the moment when Creusa put the crown on her head and smiled at herself in the mirror, then walked down the room in the robe of cloth-of-gold, stretching out her pretty foot before her to see how the folds hung, till she dropped, a crumpled heap of horror, on the floor, could Euripides have trusted the interpretation of her mute appeal to any boy in Attica? (Bernhardt might play Creusa. But Bernhardt would be playing Medea.) By means of that messenger all Athens knew and we yet know, not only Euripides' Medea, but Euripides' Creusa.

It is perhaps also an instinctive avoidance, not of the horrible, but of scenes where the horror, unless skilfully handled, may pass over into the ridiculous, which governs the use of the messenger for another type of scene. Sophocles makes Ajax stab himself in full view of the audience. But his frenzied thrusting right and left among the flocks, leaving bleeding victims heaped around, as well

as the similar episode in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, is wisely intrusted to the selective instinct of the messenger. The deer left gasping on the altar in place of the sacrificed Iphigenia is probably better described than seen. Certain pathologic details of madness, horrible in fact, horrible in repetition, may be less than that in presentation. Foam at the mouth is better shudderingly imagined than imitated with soapsuds.

If the author, as we have suggested, may wish jealously to guard for himself the interpretation of certain features rather than intrust them to the possibly unsympathetic and certainly impermanent art of the actor, he might also equally wish at times to transcend the limitations of the stage carpenter and the property man. The sea monster and the maddened horses of Hippolytus, the ship scenes in the *Helen* and the *Iphigenia*, could be only burlesqued, not represented, even with the utmost resources of the Metropolitan Opera House. One champion with scaling ladders and a host might batter at one gate of Thebes before our eyes. But we could never see it in the round with seven champions at the seven gates, as Aeschylus and Euripides have both given it to us. As I was enumerating one day the few plays which had a rural rather than a palace-front staging, a friend added, "There is the *Bacchae*. Dont you remember those beautiful scenes in the *Bacchae*?" And I could only say, "I do and you do, only because the messenger painted them."

The messenger, as well as the stage manager, may fail of his office, may overload with a multitude of fussy details. There is an instance in Euripides' *Ion*, where the banqueting pavilion is described, not in the few bold strokes necessary to give atmosphere, a background for the plot, but after the fashion of the overloaded stage in a modern drawing-room scene.

In matters like this Sophocles' sure instinct comes to the front. His messengers have indeed character of their own; they are not lay figures, and their reports take on the color of their personality. The sentinel who comes to report to Creon the capture of Antigone, caught in the act of giving the forbidden burial to her brother Polynices, is of the same breed as Shakespeare's clowns. But he

can set the stage for a scene which holds its place, not only in the heart, but in the eye.

Why thus it happened. When we reached the place,  
Wrought on by those dread menacings from you,  
We swept away all dust that covered up  
The body, and laid the clammy limbs quite bare,  
And windward from the summit of the hill,  
Out of the tainted air that spread from him,  
We sat us down, each as it might be, rousing  
His neighbor with a clamor of abuse,  
Wakening him up, whenever any one  
Seemed to be slack in watching. This went on,  
Till in mid air the luminous orb of day  
Stood, and the heat grew sultry. Suddenly  
A violent eddy lifted from the ground  
A hurricane, a trouble of the sky.  
Ruffling all foliage of the woodland plain  
It filled the horizon; the vast atmosphere  
Thickened to meet it; we, closing our eyes,  
Endured the Heaven-sent plague. After a while,  
When it had ceased, there stands this maiden in sight,  
And wails aloud, shrill as the bitter note  
Of the sad bird, whenas she finds the couch  
Of her void nest robbed of her young.

Why talk of the limitations of the Attic stage? Was there ever a stage on which men could lie cowering under the lee of a hill while the air thickened to a sultry noon? Can a stage manager send a sandstorm whirling in eddies across a wooded plain, closing the eyes, not only of the actors but of the spectators, stripping and tattering the foliage as it passes, and leave silhouetted against the sky that lonely figure, wailing like a bird robbed of her young?

I have said that the drama is a mixed art, having affiliations, so far as it appeals to the eye, with painting and sculpture, so far as it appeals to the ear, belonging to literature. If the "movies" should ever develop into an art form they would be at one pole while Greek tragedy is at the other, since its few broad lines of direct appeal to the eye are in points not vital to the development of the theme. It differs from the epic, not because it is to be seen as

well as heard, but because of structural difference as a literary form. But in calling it primarily literary, I am courting almost certain misunderstanding. For even literature we think of as something to be read with the eye, forgetting that words belong to the ear and that written characters are after all only a system of storage. A book bears the same relation to literature that a sheet of notes does to music. Neither is real till it is translated back and enters the mind by its own route. Many of us can, however, look at the printed page and imagine the sounds. Some people can do the same with sheet music. But when the day comes in which people imagine that sheet music alone is music we shall have lost something. Yet in literature we have already gone so far in that direction that the literary drama is supposed to be one not adapted for oral transmission, nor indeed can the dramatist count on an audience accustomed to receive ideas by the direct route.

A few weeks ago the Moving Picture Board of Trade gave a banquet and invited Mr. Arthur Brisbane to address them. I cannot think that they got as much aid and comfort from his remarks as I did. For he said (I quote the newspaper report partly from memory): "The motion picture, gentlemen, owes its success to the fact that we are a race of animals. We have been standing on our hind legs for fifty thousand years. We have been using articulate speech for a much shorter time. To get men to make their own moving pictures in their minds is extremely difficult. It takes a high order of intelligence to take a few lines and manufacture them into a mental film." The function of the messenger was precisely that—"to get men to make their own moving pictures in their minds, to take a few lines and manufacture them into a mental film." That does, indeed, take a high order of intelligence, but perhaps Athens in the fifth century could count on that high order of intelligence.

Confronted with the competition of the "movies," the modern drama is rather pathetically groping for its own field. The new stagecraft is, at least in theory, a return to simple suggestiveness of background, a faint revolt against the ever-usurping eye. If this weakening of external support helps to produce dramatists who can stand alone, who can manufacture mental films, they may

invent some device to fill the messenger's place. But for all his merits they cannot adopt him bodily, since he is indeed not a personage in our world.

To Athens the swift runner was no lay figure. He ran from Marathon to Athens with news of the battle, he had run to Sparta to tell of Athens' need, and when he was crossing the shoulder of Parthenion, Pan met him and intrusted to him a message for his people. When he ran upon the stage, as when he ran into the market place, men listened for something of importance. And since he has annihilated, not only space, but time, and brought his message down to us, "Let not the good messenger fail of his hope, but give him his due reward."